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How Russia Steals U.S. Defense Secrets

Bribery, blackmail, outright theft—anything goes for Moscow. Can Reagan succeed where others have failed in foiling the Kremlin raiders?

A bizarre operation mounted by U.S. agents against a Moscow-bound airliner in mid-May dramatizes growing concern over a global raid by Soviet military planners on Western technology.

Minutes before an Aeroflot jetliner was scheduled to take off from Dulles International Airport outside Washington, D.C., the agents clambered aboard and seized three cartons suspected of containing "defense-related items."

As it turned out, Customs officials subsequently announced that they had acted on an erroneous tip and that the shipment was, in fact, legal.

The episode—denounced by Moscow as "terrorism and gangsterism"—points up the Reagan administration's resolve to block a hemorrhage of Western technological secrets to Russia.

Through bribery, blackmail, espionage and theft, the Kremlin's agents are getting their hands on highly advanced U.S. products—despite stringent safeguards and an embargo on exports of this type of technology to the Soviet Union.

The problem is not a lack of controls. The embargo, in effect for years on items with direct military use, now is almost total—tightened by President Jimmy Carter after Moscow's invasion of Afghanistan. President Reagan wants to turn the screws even more.

But this supposed barrier is proving to be porous. State Department officials say leakage of American products through allied and neutral countries—particularly Switzerland and Sweden—is high.

Active traders. While American sales of all types of goods to the Soviet Union have plummeted from a projected 4.8 billion dollars to only 1.5 billion dollars in 1980, Soviet imports from Western countries actually have risen by 18 percent. Among major NATO allies, only Britain has not increased its trade with

For Senator Henry Jackson (D-Wash.), the hemorrhage of technology bears out the prediction made years ago by Bolshevik chief Nikolai Lenin that greedy Western capitalists would "supply the rope" for Russia to hang the West. As Jackson puts it: "The U.S. and its allies have been selling the rope to the Soviets. What we haven't sold or given away, they have been stealing."

The result: A steady flow of sensitive and vital Western know-how to Soviet armies and military industry. The magnitude of Russia's effort is amply shown in a sampling of its successes brought to light in recent years—

- In California, an American company sold sophisticated laser mirrors to the Soviet Union, despite an export ban. These devices reportedly could be used to enhance research on Russia's laser weapons.

- Seismographic equipment legally obtained from an oil-exploration company in Texas now is being installed in Soviet ships. Instead of searching for oil, the sensitive gear can be used to help pinpoint U.S. submarines.

- Despite official U.S. concern, Sweden sold the Russians an air-traffic-control system so advanced that it can distinguish aircraft from missiles and even track planes that are not emitting any radio signals.

- A 1.5-million-dollar shipment of U.S. computer equipment—barred from export to Russia because of its high level of sophistication—was purloined through a network of middlemen in Canada, Austria, Israel and Holland.

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Soviet power over the past 20 years.

Clandestine Soviet efforts are not new. But the Russian assault on technology today shapes up as different from any it has mounted in the past.

Now, Moscow is orchestrating what intelligence experts describe as a complex operation that ranges from technology-rich companies in California to the office high-rises and back streets of other industrialized nations.

The most obvious facet of Russia's strategy is a surge of classical espionage against firms manufacturing computers, lasers, fiber optics, electronics and other strategic goods. In fact, these companies are now the chief focus of Russia's spy agency, the KGB.

The Russians have a fat target. In just one area—California's high-technology "Silicon Valley"—hundreds of firms have access to classified data. Nationwide, sensitive technological information is routinely made available to more than 11,000 American companies—some of which have only lax internal-security safeguards.

The result is an influx of Soviet agents. As William H. Webster, director of the FBI, describes the situation:



Soviet crew tells of raid on Aeroflot planes by federal agents in a campaign against leakage of U.S. secrets. The seized cargo proved to be legitimate.

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